# Where Does Time End?

*The Three Nows*

*Forever. Never.*

*A Meditation on Final States*

Oscar Gaitan

April 2026

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. The Preface of This Inquiry

II. What the End of Time Would Mean

III. Heaven: The Now Without End

IV. Purgatory: Outside the Now, Oriented Toward It

V. Hell: The Inverted Now

VI. The Three Nows

VII. The Resurrection Body and the End of the Argument

## I. THE PREFACE OF THIS INQUIRY

These essays do not set out to discover a new doctrine. They set out to look at old ones from an unfamiliar angle — to find in the structure of time, the geometry of the will, and the logic of the Now a set of images that may help us see, with slightly greater precision, what the tradition has always believed. The goal is not novelty. It is clarity. Not a new map of the invisible world, but a different light falling on a map we already have.

With that said: what follows will press the framework developed in the previous essays into territory it was not originally designed to enter. We established that time is the condition of ordered change — that without matter and space there is nothing for time to structure, and without change there is no time. We established that the Now is the invariant crossing point at which all actualization occurs — the only place where the will operates, where mercy is available, where something genuinely new can enter reality. We established that Christ is the axis of every Now — the ground of all mercy, present at every crossing point, the one in whom all time is simultaneously held.

Now we ask: what happens when time ends?

Not for the universe — that is a different question. For the person. For the soul that has traversed the lemniscate from birth to death, crossing the Now ten thousand times, orienting its will at the crossing point toward or away from what was always present there. What is the structure of what awaits?

The tradition names three final states: Heaven, Purgatory, Hell. Not three locations in space — the tradition itself is careful about this, more careful than popular imagination allows. Three modes of existing in final relation to the God who is, in the grammar of Exodus, simply and absolutely: I AM.

## II. WHAT THE END OF TIME WOULD MEAN

To think about Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell through this framework, we must first ask what it would mean for time to end — not slow down, not thin out, but structurally cease.

We established that time depends on change, change depends on matter and space, and matter and space together with change produce the lemniscatic movement of reality — the continuous crossing of the Now, the loops of memory and anticipation curving away from and back toward the invariant center. Remove change and you remove time. Not because time is suppressed, but because the condition that generates it is no longer present.

Death removes the body. Not permanently — the resurrection of the body is a non-negotiable confession of Christian faith, and we will return to it. But at the moment of death, the soul is separated from the matter and space through which it acted in the world. It can no longer initiate change in the created order. It has no organs of perception, no hands to lift in offering, no tongue to form a prayer, no neurons through which a new thought crystallizes into decision. The structural substrate of temporal existence is gone.

This does not mean the soul ceases to exist. It means the soul exists outside the condition that made its temporal journey possible. It has, in a precise sense, stepped outside the lemniscate — not by escaping reality, but by exiting the mode of reality in which before and after have meaning.

What remains?

The will. And its final orientation.

## III. HEAVEN: THE NOW WITHOUT END

The soul that dies in full communion with God — fully purified, fully turned toward the crossing point, its will oriented without remainder toward the one who holds the Now open — enters what the tradition calls the Beatific Vision. The immediate, unmediated presence of God. Face to face, as Paul writes, no longer through a glass darkly.

What does this mean in the language of the framework?

In temporal life, every access to God was mediated through the Now — the crossing point through which the soul passed continuously, encountering the presence that grounds all actualization. The access was real. What David received at the crossing point was genuinely received. What the mystic touches in contemplative prayer is genuinely touched. But it was always access through a point — a crossing, a threshold, a momentary orientation before the loop carried the soul onward into the next moment of succession.

Heaven is what happens when the crossing point is no longer a point of passage but a place of dwelling.

Not a moment at the center of the lemniscate but residence there. The loops do not disappear — the soul remains itself, with its history, its particularity, its unrepeatable identity constituted by every crossing it ever made. But the movement from loop to crossing to loop ceases. The soul is no longer in transit. It has arrived at what the transit was always crossing toward.

Augustine's great sentence holds here with structural precision: our heart is restless until it rests in you. In temporal life, the restlessness was the movement of the lemniscate — the soul never able to stay at the crossing point, always carried by the loops of memory and anticipation into the next moment, the next need, the next incompletion. In Heaven the restlessness ends. Not because the soul is extinguished — rest is not extinction — but because the condition that produced the restlessness, the structural impossibility of remaining at the crossing point while still in temporal succession, is resolved.

This is not passivity. The tradition speaks of Heaven as fullness of life, the saints as interceding, as participating in the divine life, as knowing and being known. But it is life without the arrow of time pressing through it. Activity without incompletion. Presence without the anxiety of the next moment.

And the body? The resurrection of the body — proclaimed by Scripture, confessed in the Creed, insisted upon by Paul against every spiritualizing reduction — means that Heaven is not disembodied. The soul does not become a ghost. It becomes, in Christ's resurrection as the first fruit and the model, a body that no longer depends on matter and space for its animation. A body that is fully itself —

particular, recognizable, the same body that crossed the Now ten thousand times — but now existing in a mode for which we have no adequate image, because every image we have is drawn from temporal embodiment.

What we can say, within the framework, is this: the resurrection body is not the reinstatement of the substrate of time. It is the glorification of what that substrate was always in the service of. The body was the instrument through which the soul acted at the Now — the instrument of perception, decision, offering, love. Matter and space were the conditions under which the soul encountered the world and was encountered by God. The body was not a prison. It was the vehicle of the crossing.

The resurrection body is that vehicle fulfilled. No longer the means of becoming, but the form of having fully become.

## IV. PURGATORY: OUTSIDE THE NOW, ORIENTED TOWARD IT

Here the framework produces its most structurally precise contribution to a doctrine that is widely misunderstood, frequently caricatured, and — even among those who accept it — rarely thought through with structural care.

The soul in Purgatory is saved. This is the tradition's first and non-negotiable insistence. It has died in God's grace. Its will, at the moment of death, was oriented toward the crossing point — toward the mercy that was always present there, toward the God who is I AM. It has turned. It is not in the condition of Adam refusing the address, or Cain questioning it. It has said, with whatever imperfection, what David said: I have sinned against the Lord.

But it carries marks. Not the stain of unforgiven mortal sin — that would be a different final state entirely. But the residue of venial sin, of attachments not fully released, of love not yet fully purified. The tradition uses the image of gold refined in fire — not destroyed, but clarified. The soul is already gold. It is being purified of what is not gold.

Now the structural question: why cannot the soul in Purgatory simply purify itself? Why does it depend on the prayers, the Mass, the sacrifices of the living? Why does the Church offer suffrages — not as magical incantations, not as transactions purchasing relief — but as genuinely efficacious acts on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves?

The answer lies in what we established about time, change, and the Now.

Change requires actualization. Actualization requires the Now. The Now requires, as its structural substrate in the created order, matter and space undergoing transformation. The soul in Purgatory has none of these. It has no matter. It has no space. It cannot initiate change from within itself — not because its will is absent or oriented away from God, but because the structural condition for self-initiated change has been removed by death.

The soul desires purification. It wants to be ready. But desire alone, without the structural possibility of actualization, cannot move. The soul in Purgatory does not inhabit the Now as the living do — through matter, space, and succession — but remains ordered toward it as the only point at which its

purification can be actualized. It depends on those still in the Now the way a will depends on a body it no longer has: the desire is present and fully oriented, but the act requires another.

The living are still in the Now. They still have matter and space and the continuous crossing of the actualization point. When the Church offers the Mass for a soul in Purgatory, it is not performing a ritual on behalf of someone absent. It is acting — at the crossing point, in the Now, with full structural access to the place where mercy operates — as the body of which that soul remains a member. The offering is made by the living, in time, at the Now, on behalf of a soul whose will is united to that offering but who cannot make it from within itself.

This is not substitution in the legal sense. It is communion in the structural sense. One body, one Now, one crossing point — shared between those who still traverse the lemniscate and those who have left it but remain united to those who have not. The soul in Purgatory prays through those who pray for it, the way a hand acts on behalf of the whole body — not as a transaction but as a participation.

The Scriptural witnesses to this doctrine are not incidental. Judah Maccabeus offers sacrifice for the dead because the dead can benefit from what the living offer at the crossing point (2 Maccabees 12:38–46). The Lord's warning — agree with your adversary quickly, lest you be delivered to the judge and cast into prison until you have paid the last farthing (Matthew 5:25–26) — implies a state of purifying passage between this life and final destiny. And the warning that sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come implies, as the tradition reads it, that other sins may be addressed in the age to come (Mark 3:29). Not as a second chance — the orientation of the will is fixed at death — but as the completion of a purification already begun, carried forward by the prayers of those still in the Now.

## V. HELL: THE INVERTED NOW

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate."
— Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, *Inferno*, Canto III, v. 9.

Hell is the hardest doctrine. Not because it is obscure — the tradition speaks of it with stark clarity — but because it seems to contradict what we have established about the Now. If mercy is always present at the crossing point, and the crossing point is always open, how can any soul be permanently beyond its reach? If Christ is the axis of every Now, how can there be a Now from which He is absent?

The answer is not that He is absent. The answer is more precise, and more terrible.

The soul in Hell is not outside the Now. It cannot be outside the Now — nothing actual can be outside the Now, because the Now is the condition of all actualization. The soul in Hell exists. It is actualized, moment by moment, in the only mode existence has. The crossing point is present. The mercy is present. The axis has not moved.

What has moved — what has become permanently fixed — is the will.

During temporal life, the will was never permanently fixed. This was the grace of succession — that the loops of memory and anticipation kept carrying the soul back to the crossing point, offering again and again the possibility of reorientation. Adam refused at one crossing. But the next crossing came, and the one after that. The lemniscate does not stop. It carries the soul back to the center continuously, and at every center the address is renewed: where are you?

At death, the movement stops. Not because God withdraws the address, but because the soul — which chose, through the accumulated orientation of a temporal life, to face away from the crossing point — now faces away permanently. The choice that was rehearsed in every small deflection, every refusal of the address, every time the will oriented itself into the loops rather than toward what the crossing point contained — that choice becomes, at death, the soul's final and irrevocable posture.

The mercy is present. The axis is present. The door, as the tradition insists, is not locked from the outside. But the soul will not turn. Nothing is lacking structurally. What is lacking is the will to receive what is present.

This is what we mean by the inverted Now.

In the ordinary Now — the Now as we have described it, the Now as it is for every soul still in temporal succession — the crossing point is the site of maximum ontological openness. It is where the will meets grace, where the address is issued, where return is always possible. The Now is oriented: it opens toward what grounds it, toward the I AM who holds it open, toward the mercy that is its permanent content.

In Hell, the Now retains its structure — actualization, continuity, existence — but its orientation is reversed. The soul exists at the crossing point but faces permanently away from what the crossing point opens toward. Every moment is a Now. But every Now is a repetition of the same refusal. Not a refusal being made again — it was made finally at death — but a refusal being inhabited, eternally, as the soul's permanent mode of existing at the center of a lemniscate whose loops have stopped moving.

This is what Alphonsus Liguori heard in the clock on the wall.

*Forever. Never. Forever. Never.*

Not a sequence of torments arriving one after another. Not a future of suffering stretching forward. A Now — a single, permanent, unrepeatable Now — in which suffering is not awaited but fully present, not successive but simultaneous, the enduring experience of existing in the presence of what one has refused. The clock does not tick toward anything. It ticks because existence continues, because the Now continues, because the soul is actual and actualization has no pause. But the ticking leads nowhere. There is no loop curving forward into anticipation, no loop curving back into a memory that might soften or console. There is only the center, and the will fixed at the center in permanent refusal of what the center contains.

The tradition says that the same divine presence that is Heaven's bliss is Hell's torment. This is not a paradox but a structural consequence. The presence of God is not different in Heaven and Hell — God does not modulate His presence according to who is receiving it. What differs is the orientation of the will receiving it. A will turned toward that presence finds in it what it was made for. A will turned permanently away from it finds in it the unbearable exposure of what it has refused.

The sun that warms wax hardens clay. Not because the sun varies, but because the material differs. And here the material is not passive — it is a will that chose its own hardening through the accumulated deflections of a temporal life, and at death that hardening became the soul's permanent constitution.

One further precision is necessary, and it is important.

The soul in Purgatory cannot change because it lacks the structural substrate — matter, space, the Now from within — that makes actualization possible. Its will is oriented toward God but cannot move under its own power.

The soul in Hell cannot change for a different reason. What is absent is not the possibility but the will. The soul in Hell does not lack the Now — it inhabits the Now permanently, inescapably, without the relief of succession's movement carrying it onward. What it lacks is the orientation that would make the Now what it is for every soul that turns: the site of mercy, of return, of the address renewed.

This is the precise horror of the inverted Now. Not the absence of the crossing point but the permanent presence of it — inhabited by a will that will not cross.

*The question is never whether mercy is present. The question is only whether you are facing it.*

In Hell, that question has received its final answer.

## VI. THE THREE NOWS

We can now see the three final states not as three locations in space, not as three different relationships to divine justice, but as three permanent modes of existing at the crossing point Christ opened.

In Heaven, the soul dwells at the Now without succession. The loops of the lemniscate are not destroyed but fulfilled — the soul retains its history, its particularity, its identity constituted by every crossing it ever made. But the movement has ceased because the destination has been reached. The crossing point is no longer crossed — it is inhabited. Every moment is the same moment, not through repetition but through consummation. The restlessness of the lemniscate's motion ends because what the motion was always crossing toward is now simply, fully, permanently present.

In Purgatory, the soul no longer participates in the Now through temporal succession, yet remains entirely dependent on it as the only site of actualization. It has left the lemniscate — matter, space, and temporal succession are gone. But its will, turned toward God at the moment of death, remains ordered toward the crossing point it can no longer access from within. It depends entirely on those who are still in the Now, still at the crossing point, still able to actualize — offering from within time what the soul in Purgatory desires but cannot offer for itself. It is the most dependent state imaginable, and the most hopeful — because the soul knows what it is waiting for, desires it without ambiguity, and will arrive.

In Hell, the soul is in the Now but turned away from what the Now contains. It has not escaped the crossing point — nothing escapes the crossing point, because the crossing point is the condition of existence itself. But its will, fixed at death in permanent refusal, faces away from the mercy that remains

present at the center. The Now continues. The ticking continues. Existence continues. But without orientation toward what grounds existence, the Now becomes — in the only image adequate to it — a clock on a wall in an empty room, ticking forever, marking nothing, counting toward nothing, in the presence of everything it has refused.

## VII. THE RESURRECTION BODY AND THE END OF THE ARGUMENT

One thread remains.

If Heaven is the Now without succession, and if the resurrection of the body is a non-negotiable confession — not the immortality of a disembodied soul, but the full restoration and glorification of the particular, embodied person — then we must ask what the resurrection body means for a framework built on the dependence of time on matter and space.

The answer, held loosely because Scripture offers images rather than explanations, is this: the resurrection body is not the reinstatement of the substrate of time. It is the glorification of what that substrate was always in the service of.

In temporal life, the body was the means by which the soul acted at the Now — the instrument of perception, decision, offering, love. Matter and space were the conditions under which the soul encountered the world and was encountered by God. The body was not a prison. It was the vehicle of the crossing.

The resurrection body is that vehicle fulfilled. Paul's *soma pneumatikon* — spiritual body — is not a body made of spirit, as though matter were dissolved into immateriality. It is a body fully animated by and responsive to the Spirit, no longer subject to the entropy and fragmentation that made temporal embodiment the site of the Fall's consequences. It is the same body — recognizable, particular, bearing its history — but no longer generating time, no longer requiring succession, no longer dependent on change for its existence. Paul's contrast is not between material and immaterial, but between two modes of bodily existence: the body that traverses the crossing point in exile, subject to death and decay; and the body that dwells at the crossing point in participation, imperishable, grounded in the eternal presence that always sustained it. The body that once carried the soul through the crossing becomes the body that remains at it.

It is embodiment without becoming. Presence without process. The person, whole and entire, dwelling at the crossing point not as a passing traveler but as one who has come home.

This is what the tradition means when it says we will know as we are known. Not that knowledge becomes effortless — though it does. Not that love becomes perfect — though it does. But that the crossing point, which we touched in every moment of our temporal journey and which grounded every act of our will whether we knew it or not, becomes the permanent mode of our existence.

We were always in the Now. We were always addressed. We were always at the place where mercy was present and the will had to choose its orientation.

In Heaven, that choosing is finished. Not because freedom is abolished but because it has reached what it was always free for.

The clock that Alphonsus heard — ticking forever in the empty room — and the rest that Augustine sought — the heart that cannot rest until it rests in God — are not two descriptions of two different afterlives. They are two descriptions of the same crossing point, seen from two permanent orientations of the will.

One soul at the center, facing toward the light.

One soul at the center, facing away.

The Now is the same. The mercy is the same. The axis is the same.

***The difference is only the direction of the face.***

*Time does not end by disappearing, but by no longer being needed.*

## REFERENCES

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Corinthians 15; Matthew 5:25–26; Matthew 25:31–46; Mark 3:29; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Maccabees 12:38–46.

Augustine of Hippo. Confessions.

Alphonsus Liguori. Preparation for Death.

Boethius. The Consolation of Philosophy.

C.S. Lewis. The Great Divorce.

Dante Alighieri. The Divine Comedy.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. CCC 1020–1060.

Gaitan, O. (2026). Does time need me, or do I need time? Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19558895

Gaitan, O. (2026). Where are you? On mercy, will, and the crossing point. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19559034